This research intended to show how the process of constructing the professional identity of in-service teachers can be carried out in an online context. Analysis of the interactions identified some factors that appear to influence the construction of teacher identity - factors which should be given greater priority in the planning of the teacher training curriculum.

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Our journey as teachers
Nossa jornada como professores

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the narrative processes expressed and shared in an online academic context by 13 in-service teachers, and to present the constructed identities which emerge from this context, in a theoretical perspective linked to Discursive Constructionism. Participants engaged in individual and group activities where they narrated and shared their interwoven professional and personal stories and experiences as teachers. The data collected comprise all the writings of two teacher groups. An analysis of the discourse was carried out with reference to Positioning Theory. A multitude of subjective positions were identified in the teacher narratives, and five identity constructs emerged. These emergent professional identities were the result of multiple positioning by participants in the individual and collective contexts. The findings allowed some factors affecting the narrative construction of teacher identity to be defined. We also discuss the potential of similar online contexts for in-service teacher education.

Keywords: Narrative identity. Teacher identity. Online education.

Resumo

Este estudo almeja explorar os processos narrativos expressos e compartilhados em um contexto acadêmico eletrônico por treze professores em serviço, e apresentar as identidades construtivas que emergem desse contexto, numa perspectiva teórica vinculada ao construcionismo discursivo. Os participantes são engajados em atividades individuais e em grupo, onde narram e compartilham suas histéricas profissionais e pessoais, bem como suas experiências como docentes. Os dados coletados compreendem todos os es-

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critos de dois grupos de docentes. Uma análise do discurso foi desenvolvida a partir da referência da Teoria do Posicionamento. Uma multiplicidade de posições subjetivas foram identificadas nas narrativas docentes e emergiram cinco identidades construídas. Essas identidades profissionais emergentes são o resultado do posicionamento múltiplo dos participantes em contextos individuais e coletivos. Os dados encontrados permitiram observar alguns fatores que afetaram a construção narrativa da identidade docente a ser definida. Ademais, foi discutido o potencial de contextos eletrônicos similares para a educação docente em serviço.

Palavras-chave: Identidade narrativa. Identidade docente. Educação online.

The question of the professional identity teachers has, for some time, attracted lively interest in the field of research into teacher training. Many authors (Alsup, 2005; Korthagen, 2004; Lisimberti, 2006; Zembylas, 2003) highlight the existing connections between professional identity, training processes and teaching/learning practices.

The authors are interested in exploring the causal processes behind professional identity with regard to the training of teachers. There are various positions.

In the context of recent research, Husu (2007) has shown that professional context plays a central role in the formation of teacher identity. The workplace is considered by the author as "the landscape" from which teacher identity emerges.

Other authors (Bullogh & Knowles, 1991; Rots, 2007; Sugrue, 1997) emphasise the role in this process of early life experiences, family contexts and especially the time spent in the classroom as a student. Over time, potential teachers develop their own "teacher identity" through these experiences, which may act as an interpretive lens for each initial training experience, along with school situations and subsequent training. This identity eventually acts as a "control centre" or "catalyser" in the processes of meaning- and decision-making in the professional sphere.

The different positions were summarised in a longitudinal study carried out by Flores and Day (2006) with 14 teachers in their first years of teaching. They observed that there are three main types of aspect which determine the processes of constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing professional identity: a) *past experiences as students*; b) *early training experiences* and *teaching practices*, including those related to the *motivation* to *decide to become teachers*; c) *current teaching contexts* (teaching practice, scholastic culture etc.).

This paper aims to illustrate the dialogic processes put into play by teachers in online academic training, and to present the emerging identity constructs in a theoretical perspective related to discursive constructionism (Harré & Gilet, 1996; Potter & Hepburn, 2008). The aim is to identify the narrative processes of teacher identity construction activated by in-service teachers

in an online context, and to note the factors that appear to influence these processes.

Theoretical framework

From the constructionist view, many authors have abandoned the individualist perspective of professional knowledge, which has lead to a range of research based on the assumption that professional knowledge is the result of social negotiation (Fabbri, 2007; Zellermayer & Munthe, 2007). In this view, the role of language is emphasised in the construction of the real and the rational (Gergen & Gergen, 2008). It is assumed that many, if not the majority, of psychological and social phenomena are created collaboratively (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999) through discursive processes, mediated by language. In this sense, organisations and institutions are not material entities but symbolically constructed cultures, which are the source of the co-constructed and shared discursive/narrative resources for their members.

Positioning Theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), which has opened a rich line of psychological research (Gergen & Gergen, 2008), is particularly relevant in this perspective. According to Harré and Van Langenove (1999), the construction of social meanings depends on the discursive "positioning" of the speakers. When a person makes a statement in the context of a discursive practice, she takes a precise (subjective) position in relation to the discourse and, simultaneously, offers positioning choices to other participants. The person sees and interprets the world from her own changing and variable position on the basis of particular images, metaphors and narrative storylines. These are evident in the discursive practice in the context of which the positioning took place, resulting in jointly produced *storylines*. Not only are fragments of autobiographical stories found in this production, but also group plots, group myths and group stories.

By means of positioning, as a "set of specific discursive positions", each person externalises their own gender, race, social class, and the social reality and place assumed, essentially, their own *personal and social identity*. These identities are not stable and decisive attributes, but emerge from collective discourses with the personal world, distinguished by the ways in which the "voices" of each combine with the others (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

In the context of a study regarding the narrative construction of professional teacher identity, Søreide (2006), citing Davies and Harrè (2001), claims that: "to understand identity construction as a process of narrative positioning is useful, because it opens up an understanding of teachers as active agents in their own lives and the construction of teacher identity as a dynamic and changing activity" (p. 529). This research, conducted in a face-to-face narrative context, was the basis of the present study aimed at exploring the narrative construction of teacher identity in an online academic context using a similar qualitative research design.

The larger project

Having taught for many years in primary school and with a deep love for teaching, as a researcher at the Department of Educational Sciences (today Department FISPPA[1]), I am very interested in exploring the processes involved in choosing the profession and which affect teacher identity.

Indeed, I identify closely with the words of Connelly and Clandinin (1994) who say:

> In our work we read stories of people's lives, lives of disruption and lives of humble straightforwardness. We study people's lives, teachers', students', and children's' lives. In our courses we tell stories of our lives both in and out of the classroom, in and out of school. We tell stories of the professional and stories of the personal. Stories such as this are both our leisure reading, our research, our teaching, and our continuing teacher education (p. 146).

It is in this context that the study was undertaken. The study follows a large three year research project with the aim of exploring the issues of *initial and in-service training* in the context of the changing roles, functions, and identities of teachers, and the development of specific European teacher training policies. In the project, proposals for training in on-line communities were developed, applied and verified, in ecological contexts, for various categories of subjects. These included students, novice teachers in their first years in the classroom, and experienced teachers, who attend the Primary Education course at the Faculty of Education at the University of Padua. The results of the first years of research (Grion, 2007; Grion, Luchi, Varisco, Cecchinato, 2007; Grion, Varisco, 2007; Grion et al., 2008) have shown the effectiveness of on-line collaborative casework in the training of students and novice teacher participants. This activity, however, has not had the desired results with *expert* in-service teachers (Berliner, 1986), that is, teachers participating in the project who have at least 4 years' teaching experience in a school.

These results, and in particular analyses of narratives (Grion et al., 2008) with participants who did not respond positively to casework, led us to hypothesize that a "confidential" context (Turniansky; Friling 2006), characterized by trust in others, openness to "self revelation", the enhancement of previous teaching experience and the use of narration as an interactive instrument, may have been decisive factors in the effectiveness of the training activities proposed for in-service teachers.

These observations have contributed to our approach to the research discussed below.

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The context of the research

For several years, student-teachers enrolled in the Primary Teacher Education course at the University of Padua (Italy) have participated in an online workshop which aims to provide an environment for "shared reflective experiences". Electronic tools and the supportive input of a tutor (Cesareni et al., 2008) provide an interactive space where participants, future teachers and in-service teachers, take part in different activities and are able to discuss, evaluate, and exchange ideas about learning and teaching. Indeed, many in-service primary school teachers attend academic courses in teacher training at the University to develop their professional skills, or to attain an academic degree, which has only been required for primary school teaching since 1998.

The aim of these workshops is to offer a virtual place where students can be involved in collaborative comparison activities to clarify personal beliefs about teaching, share professional skills and acquire knowledge about their own learning path and professional development. In this way, participants can elaborate and express their own personal *professional identity construct*, which is more or less shared by the work group. In Italian primary schools, teachers do not have formal times set aside to express, discuss and negotiate their beliefs about their school experiences, or to discuss their personal and professional histories with each other. In-service teachers enrolled in the online workshop were particularly appreciative of the opportunity.

The students took part in the online workshops that are part of the Primary Teaching degree course. Attendance is a requisite for the degree .course.

At the end of the workshop, participation, i.e. the number of posts, interest in activities, etc., but not the content of discussions, was evaluated by the tutors as a "pass" or "fail".

In the last years in the educational environment specifically designed for student- and in-service teachers, the online tutor took part in the activities, which were divided into individual and group phases, by clarifying the initial instructions, encouraging the participation of all students and resolving technical problems. The tutor was able to read the postings of all participants, but did not interfere with the content.

Participants were made familiar with the environment and web tools, before taking part in about two weeks of individual activities. These activities included introducing themselves and their own personal/professional background by means of an individual writing and a collective reading tool.

During the second stage, which lasted about two months, each member of the two work groups recounted to the group their experiences in their personal/professional choice. It was expected that these narratives would act as a stimulus for initialising a shared thread in the web forum for their own personal/professional stories.

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Methods

Participants

Thirteen student-teachers participated in the online workshop when the present study was carried out. All participants were female in-service teachers in primary schools in northeast Italy. There are clearly some limitations to the sample. It includes all (rather than a selection of) participants. The sample cannot be considered representative of the whole range of student- and in-service teacher voices. Nonetheless, we can assume that they are representative of Italian in-service-teachers. Taking a naturalistic approach, our concern was to draw findings from a real-world setting, such as the online workshop held once a year at the University of Padua, where narratives could unfold naturally (Patton, 2001).

Participants were divided into two work groups based on length of service – 8-10 years for group A and 4-5 years for group B (see tables 1 and 2). These criteria were established on the basis of research conducted in the field of in-service teacher training.

Table 1
Participants in group A

Participants GROUP A	Age	Years of service
Alessandra	34 years	10 years
Debora	29 years	8 years
Giulia P.	27 years	9 years
Paola	28 years	9 years
Samantha	32 years	9 years
Sara	34 years	9 years

Table 2
Participants in group B

Participants GROUP B	age	Years of service
Filomena	28 years	5 years
Francesca	29 years	4 years
Giulia S.	29 years	4 years
Ketty	37 years	5 years
Marika	30 years	5 years
Silvia	26 years	5 years
Valentina	28 years	4 years

Procedure

After obtaining the participants' consent to use their writings for research purposes, all texts produced in the web space were collected at the end of the workshop. They were filed and organised into four corpora, identified as "individual texts" and "collective texts" for each group. They were then processed qualitatively with the ATLAS.ti textual analysis software.

The discourse analysis of the corpora of text started with "a time consuming period during which the researcher immerses him- or herself in the materials by thorough reading and rereading" (Nikander, 2008, p. 418). This allows the researcher to develop a feeling for the texts and their content; narrative plots can be found and research questions can be refined. In this phase, the methodology recommended by Peräkylä (2005, p. 870) was followed: "in many cases, qualitative researchers who use written text as their materials do not try to follow any predefined protocol in executing their analysis. By reading and rereading their empirical materials, they try to pin down their key themes and, thereby, to draw a picture of the presuppositions and meanings that constitute the cultural world of which the textual material is a specimen".

We then developed and fine-tuned a coding system with reference to Positioning Theory (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). The analysis process was intended to: a) identify the subjective positions taken by participants in the narrative context and identify them with descriptive codes; b) note the emergence of multiple professional identity constructions as clusters/ networks of subjective positions, identified qualitatively on the basis of connections of meaning which emerge from participants' discourses.

In the research, a unit of analysis was considered as a meaningful segment of text or word string (parts of sentences, whole sentences or several sentences), referring to a subjective position and therefore attributable to a single descriptive code[2]. The researcher then identified the subjective positions to which a code was assigned. Lists of codes were obtained, one for each *corpus*.

The next step of analysis followed Le Compte's (2000) indications "Once initial items have been identified, the researcher must organize them into groups or categories by comparing and contrasting or mixing and matching them [...]. The purpose of these activities is to clump together items that are similar or go together" (pp. 148- 49). The relations between codified subjective positions were thus identified. These were inferred on the basis of "emerging" links in meaning between positions, as gathered inductively in the analysis of discursive interactions. In this way, clusters of codes were identified that appeared to constitute a collective position as the representation of professional identity in the specific context. Finally,

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[2] The following are examples of codified texts: 1) "Respect and collaboration between colleagues is important" (identified by the code "share and collaborate"); 2) "… because I like work in which you have to take care of people, accompany them for a while in the difficult and at times impervious growth process" (identified by the code "takes care").

a hierarchy of the positions identified was defined on the basis of quantity and frequency of the constituent codes.

After a process of "investigator triangulation" (Denzin, 1978), a second researcher carried out a parallel analysis independently, making suggestions and comments. After discussion with the first researcher, these led to adjustments being made to the code lists and code clusters[3].

Results
Numerical data

In the four corpora analyzed, participants referred to numerous subjective positions, each of which shows how they understand themselves and their own personal and professional worlds.

The more frequent subjective positions were noted in each corpus (up to $n = 16$ repetitions of a single code, or up to $n = 16$ occurrences of a single subjective position in a single corpus). Others were less frequent (one code equivalent to one subjective position is found only once in the corpus). From the numerical data (see Figures 1 and 2) the following situations emerged: a) for both groups (A and B) more codes were found in the corpora of individual texts than in group texts; b) the codes with low frequencies (one or two occurrences) are more numerous in the individual corpora than in the forum. The limited number in the forum corpora (fewer codes found and fewer codes with low frequency) indicates the development process of the two communities. The two groups, A and B, both moved from a reduced sharing of professional positions to one of greater sharing.

Figure 1. Numerical data for the codes in each corpus
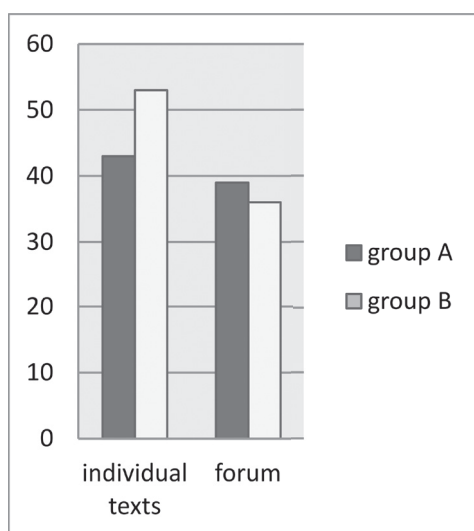
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[3] Regarding the triangulation stage, the second research was conducted on the basis of Søreide's work (2006).

Figure 2. Numerical data for the codes with a low frequency in each corpus
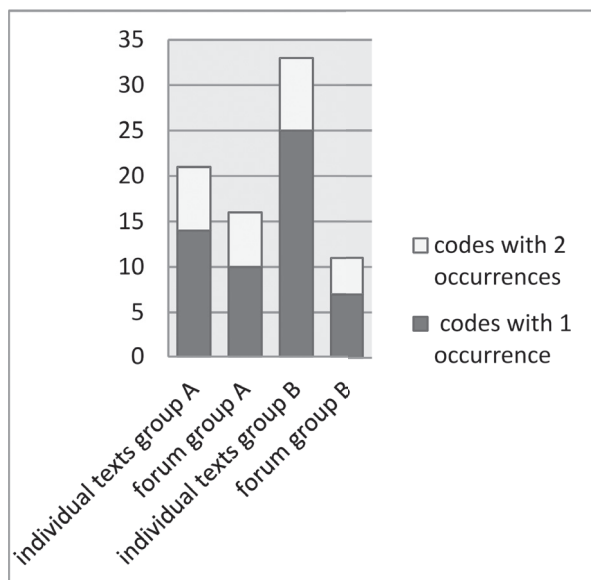
Some codified subjective positions were found in all four corpora, others were found in the individual corpora, and both corpora of the individual groups A or B.

To capture the dynamics of how participants constructed their emerging professional identities, we present here (as examples) the subjective positions found in all four corpora, and the processes (identification and distancing) through which various positionings were realized.

The most common subjective positions

Several subjective positions have been found in all 4 corpora. The code "cares for" was cited most often in the four corpora: $n = 13$ observations in the "individual texts of group A" (IA) *corpus*, $n = 8$ in the "group A forum" (FA) corpus, $n = 14$ in the "individual texts of group B" (IB) corpus and $n = 11$ in the "group B forum" (FB) corpus. This code refers to the teacher as a person particularly centered on the well-being of the children whose development she is responsible for. Giulia P. was placed in this subject position when she said, "I like work in which you have to care for people, accompany them for a while along the difficult, and at times impassable, road of growing up. I like school – because of its atmosphere, it is normally calm, otherwise it would not be suitable for children who should be allowed to grow in a relaxed environment"[4] (FA). This subject position is clarified

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[4] All the texts quoted in this article have been translated from Italian. The language and tone of the narratives appear formal and self-conscious (also in Italian), in stark contrast with most online postings, even on professional development courses. We think that the academic context affected the participants' language and restricted the spontaneity/naturalness. This could be seen as a limitation of the research.

further when Filomena, recounting her experience as a teacher in a prison, said "within these walls, I understand how important it is to protect children [of prisoners]. First, I try to give them suitable tools to grow up harmoniously, and to strengthen a positive and forceful personality" (IB). Giulia S went on to say (FB) "Teaching is the same as medicating - protecting, educating to make the mind and body healthy of someone who still has to grow as a person". Within this subjective position, some characteristics emerge which make a teacher rather like a mother figure: "I remember being particularly interested in children younger than me, towards whom I had an almost motherly approach" (Alessandra, IA), in this way, the qualities of acceptance, understanding, and receptiveness are emphasized to the point that the teacher suppresses herself in favor of her students.

Conceptually very close to the first subjective position is another which is found in all four corpora, although it is mentioned less frequently (it is found $n = 3$ and $n = 6$ in the corpora of group A and $n = 4$ and $n = 10$ in group B). The subjective position has been labeled "love of childhood". This label is used to identify teachers as people who act, and behave professionally, in the name of their special interest in children. Valentina (IB) said "I like children a lot … I consider them a true, real treasure", and Silvia (IB) "I believe deeply in the potential of children in this age group, in the end it is they who, every day, give me a reason to continue to work in this field". The orientation indicated by this interest is clear from when participants chose the profession: "There is no specific model which inspired me, other than my interest in children. I like to listen to their stories, their special way of seeing the world (Alessandra, IA).

A third common subject position in all corpora ($n = 5$ and $n = 6$ cases in the group A corpora, $n = 3$ and $n = 14$ in the group B corpora) is labeled "sharing and collaboration". Many participants are positioned as people who are professionally engaged in a collaborative activity, especially with colleagues and, to a lesser degree, with parents and pupils.

Another subjective position found in all four corpora (group A: $n = 8$ and $n = 3$ cases), (group B: $n = 4$ and $n = 5$ cases) regards teaching as a "calling or mission". In this case, participants are positioned as teachers who chose a profession which they had "felt inside" since they were young; a vocation, that is now something more than just a profession. Paola (IA) said "I believe that my desire to teach has been there since primary school. I attended a school run entirely by a religious order and I remember asking a nun if, when I was grown up, I could be a teacher without becoming a nun. […] So I don't know whether it is right to say that I chose this career, or the career chose me. It is an idea that I have been carrying around for a long time". And Samantha seemed to "shout" "School is my life!" (IA). The teacher seems to be called to a mission, or has an internal inclination that leads her to a life choice of teaching in the name of a feeling, "to feel myself chosen by teaching" as Ketty said (IB).

Another subjective position identified in the four corpora (8 cases in both group A corpora, *n* = 6 and n = 4 cases in the group B corpora) has been labeled "teacher as passion". In this case, the teacher is seen as someone who works in the profession because she is motivated "by a real pleasure" (Silvia, FB) and not merely for the job.

Finally, in all 4 corpora there are some codes which concern the relational dimensions of being a teacher, that is, the teacher as "a person who knows how to communicate and has to manage relationships", with pupils, colleagues, and other people inside and outside the school.

The common subjective positions in the two groups, and their presence in the corpora of individual texts (that is, those produced without being mediated or negotiated within a work group) help to outline a *common professional culture* of participants prior to their involvement in the study. According to Holstein and Gubrium (2000), this indicates "a shared stock of narrative resources" (ivi, p.117) from participants belonging to the wider professional community of teachers. However, how these resources are used depends very much on the particular context in wich each single participant interacts.

Subjective positions as narrative resources: processes of identification and distancing

After having identified the participants' narratives, it is possible to define the processes by which professional identities are built.. Through the narrative resources (subjective positions) present in the workshop context, participants took on specific positions by evaluating and discussing, and by placing more or less emphasis on one positioning or another.

As outlined by Søreide (2006), the positions emerge primarily through two kinds of mechanism:

– *identification*, that is recognition, ownership or approval of a subjective positioning available in the context (*positive positioning*);

– *distancing*, that is opposition to a subjective position available in the context (*negative positioning*).

Through these mechanisms, participants declared the kinds of values, expectations, and practices they identify with and/or which behaviors, ideas, values, and activities they do not identify with. In their narratives, by referring to themselves, things, individuals, and realities in their professional contexts, they constructed identities and unveiled themselves as teachers.

Sara is an example of dual positioning using the various positions found in the corpora. She told her colleagues, first positively and then negatively, of personal difficulties she had with some students in difficult situations. She said: "I continue returning to the same question: I am convinced that teachers today are too often left to their own devices and common sense [positive positioning: I identify with the teacher who is left to her own

devices and commonsense], which is important, but is not enough! In my opinion, we need more opportunities to acquire the appropriate relational skills. Think of those teachers of a certain age, who are so used to a way of thinking and acting that is now out of date! [negative positioning: I am not, and do not ever want to be, like those old teachers who…]".

In this way, Sara was building and defining - in a circumstantial, flowing and provisional way - her own *professional identity*.

Marika distanced herself from a certain kind of teacher (*negative* positioning), and in this way declared that she was open to other positionings, or to take on a different positioning, or that she "wants to be" and "is" something else: "It is difficult to collaborate with teacher colleagues who aren't motivated [*negative positioning*], who are convinced that teaching is only handing out outlines [*negative positioning*], assigning homework [*negative positioning*], doing paperwork! [*negative positioning*]".

At other times, Marika naturally took on positionings that help to define who she is, and wants to be, as a teacher – that is, her *professional identity.*

Participants constructed their professional identities through negotiation of subjective positions when narrating, individually or collaboratively, by positioning sometimes negatively, but more often positively. The identities are the result of various combinations of the possible subjective positions in each context taken by the participants.

Emerging professional identities

The professional identities that emerge are the product of participants' positioning in individual and collective contexts. These identities are the result of the interwoven, fluid, temporary, contextualized subjective positionings taken on by participants.

Five identity constructs emerged from the negotiation of participants' subjective positions and are listed here in order of importance in the context.

The relational teacher

The professional identity of the "relational teacher" is a powerful identity construct, emerging from the narratives of participants in groups A and B, in the individual and group stages. Participants noted that in the school system today, which is becoming more complex and in which the teacher takes an increasingly central role, the teacher's relational skills are particularly important. Sara notes: "[...] I work with six teams and, at times, I have to confess that it is not always easy. However, I have noticed that the winning card is always constructive dialogue. Indeed, I have noticed that, even in the worst situations, sitting down and talking, trying to 'understand' and putting yourself in the other person's shoes always helps". By emphasising the emotional and affective aspects of the relationship, the participants identify with the relational teacher as a person who "is able to enter into an empathetic dimension with the students so as to appreciate their individual needs and the individuality of each student" (Debora). Sara specifies that

"the relational dimension is not limited to the intellectual level, but is mainly developed in the affective sphere".

The maternal teacher

A second identity, emerging in both groups, is that of the "maternal teacher". Although less articulate and complex than the previous one, this identity is found extensively in participants' writings. It is a construct formed around the code "takes care", describing the teacher who feels the desire to be useful to others, with an understanding, friendly, human attitude and helpfulness towards the students. This is the teacher who supports and accompanies the student in her growth process, and places particular attention on listening to the students in order to understand their needs and to evaluate their interests and abilities. She has a relationship with them that touches the personal areas of emotion and affection, helps them with empathy, courage and affection; she has almost an adoration of the special world of childhood, whose discourses she loves to listen to, and its special way of seeing things and the world. This teacher develops her profession in the light of that love and respect she feels towards the students: "I firmly believe in the potential of children at this age. In the end they are themselves. Every day they give me the motivation to go on and to involve myself in this environment" (Silvia).

Ketty also reflects clearly on this: "This innocent, unconditional love for the smaller ones, but also for the weakest or simply for those who need my help, gradually became a conscious and recognised sensitivity, which I wanted to exercise and make more 'reasoned', more intelligent".

The professional teacher

Unlike the two previous professional identity constructs which emerged from all four corpora, the third construct, that of the "professional teacher" takes shape clearly and definitively in the two corpora of individual texts (A and B). Here the professional teacher takes on the attributes identified as "ongoing training", "shares and cooperates" and "teacher by passion", indicating unanimously these three aspects as fundamental components of the teacher identity.

Indeed, relating the quality of the school to teacher education, Filomena says: "I think that constant, wide-ranging pedagogical and teacher training for the staff is necessary to achieve a quality school".

The collaborative dimension should be an important professional quality for participants, together with the training: "A good teacher is also the one able to share all her knowledge, doubts, uncertainties, fears and successes, and also any failures, with her colleagues, and to find answers and possible solutions with them" (Alessandra).

For many of the participants, it seems that teaching is not just a job, but an activity that is also pursued "for love". Paola takes this position when telling of her (now past) daily effort to reach her distant place of work and concludes: "[...] but the joy of being able to do what I had always wanted to

do made me forget the distance".

Marika also takes this position, stating that: "The ideal teacher for me must love her work and thus be inspired by a real passion for teaching".

The teacher in crisis

The fourth professional identity that emerges, from the group A narratives only (teachers with longer experience), and in particular from the forum corpus, is that of the "teacher in crisis". The many positionings here show the widespread occurrence of moments of particular difficulty, discouragement and demotivation in the life of teachers; moments that lead to the question of whether or not to continue in the profession. What are the reasons for these crises? On one hand, the complexity of the school situation and the commitment demanded of teachers, at times excessive and all-absorbing, ends up wearing them down. On the other, poor social recognition, especially of teachers working with the lower levels, humiliates and demotivates them. Alexandra, for example, reflects: "Ours is a very demanding job that takes up our entire self and even now I wonder whether I will be able to continue right through to retirement age".

Crisis situations also arise as a result of feelings of isolation from the teaching authorities and the limited dynamism of many school environments, marked by a fear of change and innovation; environments that "clip the wings" of those teachers who consider teaching an activity of constant research, planning and openness to the future: "Certainly, working in an environment where you know that things will always stay the same and anything new is shown the door before it has even been let in... well, it is easy to feel demotivated" (Paola).

The teacher as a person

Finally, the identity of the "woman-person teacher" emerges, much more markedly in the two group B corpora than in group A. The urgency with which these positions seem to emerge - some narrative sequences seem to be "cried out" by the teachers - justifies the consideration of this identity as one of the most important for understanding the significance assigned by the participants, especially those in group B, to their profession and themselves as "teaching professionals".

The personal stories intersect and merge with the professional ones, so that they are almost indistinguishable. Samantha profoundly impersonates this identity. For her, teaching is the fulfilment of her life, both professional and personal. Several times she asserts that "School is my life!". Personal frustration as a woman became the reason for her decision to consider the school as "her home", and teaching as "her life". The identity of the teacher is made up of an inseparable weave of personal and professional dimensions: "I think it is wrong to have a ready-made model, because before being a teacher, I am a person, I am Silvia. I have followed a certain direction in life; I live in a particular context...Ways of acting and speaking that I learnt from my parents and my teachers, are a more or less conscious part of me...;

they are constituent aspects of my life" (Silvia).

Therefore, every situation and practice that takes place in the school relates not so much to the quality and characteristics of formal, standardised teacher training, or an acquired and applied technique, but to personal life histories and the construction of one's own "being" a teacher, an expression that one participant clearly differentiates from the more generic and less involving one of "working as" a teacher.

Discussion

The individual process of constructing a professional identity can be seen as one of positioning and negotiating between the different possible identities emerging in each discursive context (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999; Søreide, 2006).

We have discovered how emerging identities are linked to one another, and which of the emerging identities are meaningful constructs for participants in this context.

The first professional identities considered (the "relational teacher" and the "maternal teacher") could be interpreted as the effect of particular narrative resources found in the specific human context.

A strong scholastic culture set in Italian primary schools features a typical and traditional image of the female and motherly teacher. It is a culture where the teaching role is mainly represented by caring, loving aspects and a relationship with school children, the central elements on which, until not long ago, Italian professors of education built the training and curriculum of elementary school teachers. These identities therefore seem to reflect the social framework determined by an Italian culture that was still deeply male chauvinist, in which the role of the primary school teacher was "restricted" to women (indeed nearly 100% of the field are women), as if they were "predestined" the task of protecting and caring for small children.

These two strong, omnipresent and identifiable connotations of the participants seem to confirm an idea formulated by many researchers (Bullogh & Knowles, 1991; Fajet et al., 2005) that higher or academic education has little effect on professional identity. Of greater importance and influence are the various models and teaching styles learnt and encountered during experiences as students.

However, these first two identities, in which all participants in our online workshop recognised themselves, do not only appear to be traditionally and exclusively characterised by caring and relational dimensions. Their features include sensitivity and commitment to different and complex scholastic contexts, an awareness of the teacher's personal involvement and curiosity in educational and childhood realities, and attention to childhood needs and interests.

The last two identities reported are of particular interest.

The professional identity of the "teacher in crisis" was found only in group A - the teachers with more than eight years' experience. It can be

associated with the burn-out syndrome, which is nowadays recognised as a phenomenon that is becoming more widespread among teachers. With regard to the status of the "teacher in crisis", feelings of loneliness and abandon appear to be the causes that most frequently emerge. We have observed that despite efforts towards deep and collaborative opportunities in school environments, carried out for some decades in primary schools, there still seems to be a strong individualistic culture accompanied by a risky status of professional solipsism.

Finally, the identity of the "teacher as a person" emerged in both groups.

The latter identity is in line with Viteritti's (2007) observations regarding the relationship between personal and professional identity in the sphere of complex professional organizations. An analysis of the participants' positioning reflects the fragile and changing everyday relationships between personal identities and professional roles. This is a problematic relationship for individuals who measure, and construct, themselves by balancing what they are asked "to be" at work, and what they "are" according to their own individual needs and plans. Viteritti said that "this ambivalence, between *what I can be, what I try to be* – and what I do and/or what I am asked to do, is an unstable, ambiguous field, of *continuous structuring. I am always me but not really me* – this could be saying I am an individual compared to the relationship between the self and the work one does" (ivi, p. 181, italics in the original).

Viteritti highlighted the area between *disorientation* and *instability*, and also the structuring that is created between the subjective and social spheres in which "the subject *is* or *is not, still or never, completely herself"* (*ibid*.). This may explain Kitty's feeling when she recounts, and reflects on, the fact that it is not easy to distinguish and identify where behaviors, mental attitudes and thoughts end "with my being a teacher, and at what point my real individual identity begins […]. Most of the time, however, I have a feeling of completion, harmony, and balance that leads me to perceive the peculiarity of their coexistence".

Taking *Viteritti's argument further, and in particular her four-part classification of scenarios deriving from the relationship between personal identity and professional identity, we could cite Samantha – who asserts "school is my life!"* (demonstrating the need to forget personal frustrations and throwing oneself totally into work, and, in this way identifying entirely with the profession). Viteritti calls this scenario the "absorption of the self in the role" with all the positive and negative consequences that it implies.

Alessandra seems to risk falling into the category of "withdrawing from the role". Although her original reasons for becoming a teacher remain unchanged, she stated the fact that she likes children no longer seems to be enough. A teacher's job is very demanding and requires total involvement. For this reason, Alessandra said: "even now I ask myself if I will be able to carry on until retirement".

Factors that influence the construction of teacher identity

A further analysis of the results contributes to the current discussion of the factors that determine the formation of the professional teacher identity.

In agreement with Husu (2007), here, too, the professional context seems to be important in forming the identity of teachers who work with younger classes. This process, however, cannot be separated from the influence of factors relating to the subjects' personal histories and characteristics. Indeed, three orders of decisive factors seem to emerge from the research.

Primarily, there are *relational processes* established by the individual teacher in the school context, with her own colleagues, students, parents and society. The possibility, capacity and difficulty in relating to all components of the school and non-school communities are aspects that the participants mention in identifying themselves, directly or indirectly, as teachers. The relationship with their students seems, furthermore, to influence the orientation of their practices, work motivation, school well-being/discomfort, elements that are central to the construction of "being teachers".

The professional identities would seem, moreover, to take shape as a result of more strictly professional factors. On one hand, there is the *personal relationship with/attitude to their profession*. This aspect, which may lead some to experience teaching as a passion or to simply consider it a job done without any particular enthusiasm, would seem to be very closely linked to the motivations relating to the decision to become a teacher, a decision made as an existential *mission*, casually or more or less by necessity. On the other hand, the influence of their own *view of teaching* also emerges. There are those who see the teacher as a person who has some precise knowledge to impart and techniques to apply, and those who identify rather with Schön's "reflective professional" (Schön, 1993). This means that the "theoretical" perspective, accepted more or less knowingly by each teacher, conditions her teacher identity and determines her "being" a teacher.

A further factor that seems to influence the construction of professional identity is represented by the moments and situations of *personal and professional difficulty*. The personal histories of these femaleteachers, constantly in search of establishing a balance between their own personal commitments and duties and their professional ones, between their own ideals and the realities of the profession which do not always correspond, are factors with an important influence on the development of the different pathways in constructing oneself as a teacher.

Online environments and tools

It is necessary to reflect on the web context of the laboratory and the effectiveness of the proposed tools.

First, we can presume the effectiveness of the particular context. This

specific structure consists of *narrative* interactions associated with personal and professional aspects, a feature that has created a climate of mutual trust and reliance (Turniansky & Friling, 2006) and has underlined all types of professional experience. In their "concluding reflections" on the workshop, which we asked to participants to write, most of the student teachers appreciated the confidence-inspiring atmosphere of the online environment. This is clearly demonstrated in the words of Paola: "This is the first online laboratory I have done and it has been a truly constructive experience. From our discussions we have dealt with general problems that we share as teachers, even if in different contexts. Exchanges with colleagues who teach in primary school, […] have allowed me to become aware of crucial aspects of daily activities. What was said in my group has given me the chance to analyze my actions more carefully, to find different ways to look at my efforts as a teacher. To have had the opportunity to share personal experiences and moments of crisis which have arisen over the years have made me feel a part of a "family", in which I was understood and listened to. So, the online laboratory has been very useful to me, a training experience which must be repeated".

In this kind of environment, experienced teachers have been able to engage themselves in the "continuous and dynamic process which brings people to search for a meaning and to (re)interpret their values and their own experiences" (Flores & Day, 2006, p. 220), in other words, a process of construction of the teacher identity.

Some participants showed that they were aware of these dynamics, as can be seen in their final written comments about their experience in the laboratory.

Ketty said: "[…] Furthermore, the possibility of comparing with others and making contact with the ideas of others was a stimulating opportunity and a rich source of ideas. In fact, it helped us analyse our own and other people's points of view and understand the point which we have reached in our journey as teachers".

This type of dynamics is defined by some authors as the process of professional development (Sachs, 2001; Flores & Day, 2006). Becoming a better and more complete teacher implies a process of transforming one's professional identity, a process that for teachers "is mediated by their own experience in school and outside of school as well as their own beliefs and values about what it means to be a teacher and the type of teacher they aspire to be" (Sachs, 2001, p. 6).

Secondly, as suggested by some authors (Bonk & King, 1998; Barab, Kling, Gray, 2004; Francescato et al., 2006; Hiltz & Goldman, 2005, Garrison & Anderson, 2003;), it may be that the online context, in particular the asynchronous, text based environment, activates the reflexive processes that allow teachers to construct meanings about the self and the professional world of which they are members. As Admiraal et al. (1998) said: "Telematics

offers the opportunity to instruct mentor and supervise student teachers in a more flexible way with respect to time and place than common face to face conversation methods" (p. 59).

In this light, we can interpret Sara's words: "[…] you have to take time to write and to think about what to write, to choose what to say in a logical way, to be able to reflect by looking at yourself and your experiences from the outside to tell your story and […] to bring your own ideas to a conclusion (something you can't do orally!)".

Looking more closely at the environments used, individual writing and the forum, the research results show the development of the two participant groups in the move from individual narrative to the shared narrative of the forum. As already noted, fewer codes were identified in the corpora of individual texts than in the forum corpora, for both groups. The shared narrative leads participants to abandon some subjective positions, probably less significant to them, which are therefore less important to the definition of professional identity. Instead, they appear to focus on fewer aspects, which are those more widely shared. Interaction in the forum - at times enriched by opposing dynamics that highlight some scarcely-explored constructs, assertions taken for granted etc. - thus encourages greater elaboration of the constructs and better exploration of each subjective position and identity definition. Both the individual and group activities proposed in the online laboratory may be considered important from a pedagogical perspective, because they allow participants to express and explore their own professional and personal experiences at a narrative level, leading to greater awareness of themselves as teachers. However, the value of the collective dimension of the online forum (significantly more flexible and practicable than in-service teacher training *in situ*) must also be underlined as a suitable (if not preferable) place/tool for pursuing the processes aimed at increasing awareness of professional identity.

Conclusion: constructing identity in an online educational context

This research intended to show how the process of constructing the professional identity of in-service teachers can be carried out in an online context. Analysis of the interactions identified some factors that appear to influence the construction of teacher identity - factors which should be given greater priority in the planning of the teacher training curriculum. This can be seen as a positive step towards raising the quality of teacher training, and towards planning training courses oriented by student need and by the teacher's specific need "to learn to teach", rather than generic "curriculum needs", so as to "teach the students" rather than "teach the curriculum" (Kortagen, Loughran & Russel, 2006).

Some more specific possibilities of online environments also emerged

with regard to the narrative construction of teachers' professional identity. The possibility must also be recognised of achieving what Connelly and Clandinin (1994) call "Teacher Education as Reconstruction", compared with "Teacher Education as Injection", in their classic article on teacher training. Teacher training is not a linear *step by step* path, nor can it be reduced to a transfer of knowledge and skills. Rather, it is a process of continuous rethinking and reconstruction of the self through narrative. Telling one's story as a teacher is a process that involves "reflection on", the selection and adaptation of events (professional and non-professional) in order to make them significant to the narrator and the listener (peer or trainer). Telling (and listening to) stories is thus an important means of constructing and facilitating identity development (Watson, 2006). The deepest understanding of the self as teacher leads to a self-transformation that represents a form of professional empowerment (Zembylas, 2003).

Regarding the specific web context used, we can observe how the results of this research are particularly important to in-service teacher training. Use of the Internet is an essential resource for reaching people regardless of their location, and for attaining active, motivated participation in tasks. For this reason, the online context is a particularly appropriate option for continuous in-service training.

These considerations also arise from many participant reflections when they were asked to assess the online laboratory.

"This experience has been positive. Indeed, from a practical point of view there are many advantages regarding the organisation of time: long breaks allowed me to think and then take part when my thoughts were more mature or simply when I was free (and this may not seem very important, but the quality is not indifferent, for example in motivation) (Ketty).

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